

From House to Home: a long conversation

*'For most people, the dwelling – both house and garden – is an important focus for self-expression; a place to create both the facilities and the symbols that reflect the specific personalities of its occupants.'*⁴

To commission an architect to design your house is a brave move. At the earliest stages of brief development it involves a careful probing of how you live. Initial questions may seek to establish the basics of budget and size – these are the easy ones to answer – and they both usually (but not always) sit in some proportional relationship to one another. The harder queries explore how you see yourself using private domestic space: these demand that the client imagines him/herself in spaces that do not yet exist. Answers can be framed as aspirations or in relation to other priorities. Is the inside more important than the outside, or should they both be interconnected, overlapping, sometimes merging when weather allows? Is daylight important in all the spaces or should there be a contrast between light and dark, open and enclosed, morning or evening? Is a series of cellular rooms more important than a sequence of spaces that can adapt to changing circumstances?

Each of the panels in this exhibition reveals something of the attitudes of their clients to private domestic space. A house after all is not something you commission lightly, or frequently. For many who get to do so, it is the result of years of planning, saving, searching, and dreaming. The houses in these panels are the product of consideration of several factors, they are evidence of a process that can take several years, and of a relationship between the client and architect (and contractor), which involves the stitching together of the parameters of cost, site, orientation, view, weather, materials, details, ground conditions, planning regulations, building regulations, and individual preferences, but always with the belief that the house will, after handover, grow with its owners, adapt gently to their needs, be extendable in the future if needs be, expand to accommodate visitors, contract in the depths of winter to be a cosy refuge. And now and then, perhaps when the sun rises through an unexpected aperture for a few days a year, or as the garden matures, the house will creep up on its now familiar owners on occasion and surprise and delight them.

It is in their everyday occupation, however, that these houses pay back the effort put into their design. Comfort can mean different things to different people, but a bespoke house aims to achieve a client's vision of comfort. At the most obvious level

many of the houses in this exhibition demonstrate the integration of new standards of energy efficiency into house design. A few, including *Robyn House*, by Paul Keogh Architects and *M House* by Studio Plus Two Architects achieve passive or close to passive house standard and for some clients this will be an important benchmark, requiring minimal energy input, while maintaining high levels of thermal comfort. The majority of houses shown here are not designed to full passive house standard, but many achieve BER 'A Rating' and almost all demonstrate an attitude to situation, topography, detail, use of material and daylight, to minimise the extra load they place on the environment, while maximising the enjoyment of space.

It is worth questioning whether a large house built to passive standards but remote from schools, shops or workplace, may in the long term be less sustainable, than a modestly-sized home built within walking or cycling distance from daily destinations. The cost of energy required to power but also to transport goods and people from place to place, will increasingly form part of the debate on sustainability. Passive living is not just a factor of the energy rating of the fabric of the house, but of an holistic approach to how we *as a society* think about dwelling, about the re-use of existing space in the first instance and about the appropriateness of scale. Some of these issues are carefully explored in *Seapark*, by Therese O'Halloran, a compact but light-filled house in Galway city and in *Galway City Low-Energy Retrofit*, by Don Silke.

Dominic Stevens *€25,000 House* demonstrates that architectural design does not equate to high cost. This little gem, realised through an intelligent use of material and detailing, along with a collaborative construction process resulted in a dwelling that is not only fit for purpose in terms of economy and efficiency, but is expansive in how it relates to the landscape in which it sits.

One theme that emerges from many of the houses in the exhibition is a desire to engage with the landscape. In some cases the house becomes a *part* of the wider landscape. This attitude is most clearly seen in *Mimetic House*, by Dominic Stevens, in which the house acts as a kaleidoscope of translucency and reflection, playfully mirroring the drumlin landscape of Leitrim. It can also be seen in the work of Lid Architecture. Their *Landscape Room* frames and holds the Donegal landscape within its extending walls, and in *Stepping House* the topography of Arainn Mór sets up a series of platforms on which the life of the holiday home plays out.

The courtyard as a type has been intelligently studied and used in many of the homes to create shelter from the wind, interconnection between parts of the house and a rootedness to place. AXO's *Courtyard House*, *Sheltered House (Tuam)* by A2, *Old House New House* by Donoghue Corbett and *MOT House* by McGann Scahill demonstrate the suitability of this approach to the climate in the west of Ireland. Covered useable outdoor space is valuable in a climate where, while it is quite often wet and windy, it is quite rarely too cold to be outdoors. Dwellings can enjoy year-round outdoor use if thought is given to shelter from wind and rain.

So what is the paradigm house in the west of Ireland? Most of the houses in this exhibition are the result of many years of thinking and learning about the dwelling, collecting precedent, developing details, seeing what works and carrying that forward, while discarding those ideas that when tested just don't come up to scratch. While some practices are rigorously testing the fundamental idea of what a house can be, with a lightness of touch that can be seen for example in the lovely *Butterfly House*; for the majority of architects private house design underpins the everyday work of their practice. The houses on show here represent years of thought and long conversations about the dwelling between these architects and their clients. There's little repetition, each house is bespoke to fit the client, site and budget, and there's palpable evidence in the panels of ambition to design the best house both for the client and for the site. In the end though, perhaps the answer to the question is that the paradigm house is the one the client loves living in.

Orla Murphy

ⁱ Nielsen, Jorn Orum. (1996) *Dwelling. At home – in community – on Earth*. Copenhagen: The Danish Architectural Press